

A CHAPTER FROM THE NORTH-WEST REBELLION.

BY GEO. B. BROOKS.

FAR beyond the lines of travel, in a portion of the great Dominion where the white residents are few and far apart, and are either missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church or factors of Hudson Bay Company's trading posts, is a district of surpassing loveliness. Lacking the grandeur of the Rockies and Selkirks, or the weird sublimity of the Saguenay Valley, it possesses a beauty of scenery—hill and dale, lake and stream, copse and forest—which, when it becomes better known, will doubtless attract tourists from all parts of Canada. At present, despite the fact that the region teems with game great and small, its inhabitants, few in number, are pure Indians, belonging to the most peaceful tribe among them, the Chippewayans.

Comparatively little is known about these far-northern red men. Less warlike than their southern neighbors, the Crees; less civilized than the Blackfeet; seldom coming in contact with white men, and consequently purer in their morals than most North-Western aborigines, they are industrious, tractable, grateful to those who befriend them, and skilled as fishermen and hunters. Their chief settlement, extending from Beaver River to Cold Lake, contains a few well-built, substantial log-cabins, a small Roman Catholic Church, some cleared and ploughed land and, here and there, some rude attempts at fencing. They farm in very primitive fashion, but own a few head of cattle, a few rough, shaggy ponies, and the usual number of gaunt, ill-looking dogs,—not the least important or useful of their belongings.

As a race, or rather as a tribe, the Chippewayans have much in common with other Indians of the North-West,

yet they differ from them in many ways. What one notices in them first of all, just as it is noticeable in all Indians, is the prevalence of harsh features, a swarthy, if not a dirty, complexion, and sparkling eyes. But a different and better type is to be met—tall men, with noble-looking heads and delicate features. They are the exception among them, it is true; but they can be seen, and are a proof that the tribe is not utterly degraded. They are an interesting people, and just as long as they are not contaminated by white people, will, doubtless, retain their simplicity and the other good traits of character which they possess.

Nominally, at least, these people are Christians, and members of the Roman Catholic Church. Their religious instructor is Father Legoff, who has lived and labored among them for the last thirty years. Rev. Father Legoff deserves something more than a passing notice. A tall, thin, spare man, I mistook him for an Indian when I first saw him. His face was tanned the color of leather, his clerical garb was frayed and worn, his shoes would have puzzled a cobbler to mend, and altogether he looked more like one of his flock than their shepherd. It is true that my introduction to him was just after he had spent many weary weeks a prisoner in Big Bear's camp, wandering over the country, ill fed and ill protected against the weather. Father Legoff was born in Quebec and is of good birth, being descended from a long line of aristocratic nobles of Old France. Nearly forty years ago, when a young man, he volunteered for missionary work in the North-West, and, as I have already stated, has been

among the Chippewayans for the last thirty years. Residing long amongst the dusky children of the wilderness, following nomads, and sharing the habits and exposures of the tribe, in time he became subject to all the vicissitudes of the situation, and partook largely of the character of his surroundings. Ill and weary as he looked, there was no more enthusiastic priest in the North-West seven years ago. To listen to him as he sat at supper in my tent; to see his eye kindle and light up with enthusiasm, as he told of the gratitude of the uncultured people in his charge; to gradually come to understand his gentleness of character, his child-like, religious simplicity; to understand the hardships he had passed through—often in winter on the verge of starvation; to realize all he had given up, all that he had voluntarily assumed, was to love the shabby-looking priest, and to wish the world contained more such noble men and noble Christians. For months at a time this devoted priest never saw a newspaper or received a letter. His diet was that of the Indians, coarse, plain, ill cooked. He would work with the members of his flock on their little patches of clearances; he baptized, married, buried them, and when his own time comes, will be buried by them.

Whatever the bickerings of party politicians, whatever the aims of self-seeking, ambitious men; however strong religious antipathies in Eastern Canada may be, I wish to bear my testimony to the devotedness, earnestness and simplicity of the Roman Catholic missionaries in the Canadian North-West. When men of birth and breeding, of culture and high social standing, voluntarily sever the tie which binds them to the glitter and glare of the world, and don the garb of the humble missionary, there must be a prompting which carries them beyond earthly considerations. It was such a faith that sustained the holy army of martyrs in the last

agonies of their cruel torture, and the same faith reconciles to a life-long exile in arctic or semi-arctic latitudes the noble men who, for conscience sake, labor among the far North-West Indians and the Esquimaux.

The Chippewayans took part in the North-West rebellion, but reluctantly and under compulsion. The whole of Louis Riel's object in fomenting trouble; all the wild schemes he may have entertained, with the purpose of forming a republic of which he was to have been the first president, will probably never be known, but as he sent his runners and emissaries to all the bands of Indians between Rat Portage in the east and the Rockies in the west, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he contemplated a general Indian uprising, with all its accompanying horrors. Very shortly after the Frog Lake massacre, a band of Cree Indians visited the Beaver River settlement, and urged the Chippewayans to take up arms against the government. A prompt refusal was the reply, and then began a system of threats and petty persecution which finally succeeded. Some of the cabins in the settlement were looted; the church was invaded, and the altar despoiled, the few modest ornaments on it being stolen; cattle were driven away and the lives of the people menaced. Urged by Father Legoff, the Chippewayans remained loyal for a long time, but as their cattle kept disappearing and their cabins were burnt, they eventually threw in their lot with the rebels and went to Fort Pitt, accompanied by Father Legoff as a prisoner.

While it is to be deplored that these inoffensive people should have joined the rebellion, it was, in one sense, a good thing they did so. They were never active rebels. When Fort Pitt was burnt, they held aloof and took no part in its destruction. At the fight at Frenchman's Butte between the rebels and the Canadian militia, they refused to fire a shot, and on several

occasions showed they were unwilling rebels. To their devotion, at least some of the white prisoners Big Bear had captured, owed their lives. Every night they mounted guard over the tepee in which factor McLeod, his wife and daughters were confined, threatening to shoot at sight the first man who should try to invade their privacy. For three months, Big Bear dragged his captives about the country between Edmonton and Battleford, and during the whole of that time the Chippewayans rendered them many a service and did them many a kindness, often sharing with them their food. Who knows what additional horrors there might have been to relate had not these few Indians been in the rebel camp?

Immediately after the fight at Frenchman's Butte, General Strange camped for a couple of days on the banks of a small creek close to the scene of the fight, awaiting the arrival of General Sir Fred. Middleton from Battleford. While so waiting, a number of Big Bear's prisoners came into the camp and were well cared for. They had doleful tales to tell of hard treatment, painful marches and scant provisions, during the time they had been captives; and their appearance bore them out in all they said. A second-hand clothes dealer would not have given a dollar for all their apparel. From them it was ascertained that after the fight at the Butte the rebels had become disorganized and had broken up into different bands, Big Bear having gone in the direction of Battleford, and another band having gone north, taking with it Mr. McLean, the Hudson Bay factor at Fort Pitt, and his family. When General Middleton arrived, General Strange with a detachment of militia and mounted scouts was sent to the Beaver River in the hope of intercepting the rebels who were stated to have gone north. The Chippewayan reserve was reached after a three days' march through a country very diffi-

cult to traverse and swarming with mosquitoes and all kinds of small torturing flies. On the evening of the third day the detachment camped about a mile from Beaver River, on the southern extremity of the reservation, General Strange making Rev. Father Legoff's house his headquarters.

About four days later, a tall, thin man, heavily bearded and browned by the sun, shabbily dressed in a frayed long black cloak or coat which reached to his heels, was halted by one of the sentries and asked his business. He was no other than Father Legoff, and he was at once taken to General Strange's headquarters, where he told his tale. He stated that the Chippewayans had broken away from the rebel Crees and were within a few miles of their old home, anxious to return, but when they found the Queen's soldiers in possession of the place they were afraid to do so, conscious of having done wrong. The reverend gentleman had come on alone to see the officer in command of the troops and to intercede for the Indians. What passed between General Strange and Father Legoff is known only to those two gentlemen, but that same evening Father Legoff, accompanied by the chaplain of the Mount Royal Rifles, left the camp and went in the direction where the Chippewayans were. The following day, shortly after noon, a great yelping of dogs, gradually growing louder, showed that strangers were nearing the camp, and an officer and a squad of men were sent to meet them. It was the Chippewayans with their wives and children returning to give themselves up, and trusting to the leniency of General Strange. A more pitiful-looking lot of human beings it would be hard to imagine. Men, women and children were literally in rags, in many cases not having enough clothing to cover their nakedness. They were more than half famished, and many among them were suffering from loathsome

running sores. They were not allowed to pass the line of sentries, but after being disarmed, were told to camp about half a mile from where the soldiers' tents were. Canned meat, hard biscuits and some tea were served out to them, and gratefully did the poor folk accept the dole.

From Father Legoff it was ascertained that a few Crees, having with them Mr. McLean and his family, had pushed further north and would probably be found somewhere along the shores of Cold lake. The day after the Chippewayans surrendered, Lieut.-Col. Osborne Smith and one hundred men were despatched north to Cold lake, with orders to patrol the shores of the lake, and keep a careful lookout for any rebel bands. There is an old saying that "All trails end at Beaver River," and certainly it was hard work getting through the country between that river and the lake. There was no trail, but any amount of muskeg, and the swarms of flies were simply unendurable. Everything had to be carried on pack horses, and for them a road had frequently to be cut through the bush. The poor brutes suffered intensely from the heat and the flies, and more than once became so maddened by pain that they broke away from their drivers and plunged into whatever water might be near, glad to cool themselves. It was very nearly as hard upon the men in the detachment. As no tents were taken, every man had to carry an additional load in the shape of his overcoat, and not a few were overpowered by the heat. From the corners of the eyes, from the ears and nostrils, blood trickled—the consequence of bites from flies so small

that they were hardly discernable. This torture for man and beast lasted two days, when, with a joyful shout, the lake was reached, and for a time, at least, discomfort was at an end.

As its name implies, the waters of the lake were intensely cold, but were very pleasant to drink. With a rush, every man plunged into them, and the pack horses, as soon as relieved of their loads, did the same. At the borders of the lake the flies disappeared; beyond a few mosquitoes at night, there was no annoyance from that cause.

The lake is a large sheet of water, about twenty miles from north to south, and about the same from east to west. It was on the south shore that the militia camped, making their couches on the sandy beach out of the branches of trees. Small scouting parties were sent out, and the remainder of the soldiers enjoyed themselves fishing and bathing, all drill having been discontinued. After being at the lake for a week, a courier from General Middleton brought the news that Mr. McLean and his family had been rescued, and orders for the detachment to return to Fort Pitt—an order which, of course, was cheerfully obeyed.

It only remains to state that the Chippewayans were all pardoned by the Government for the part they took in the rebellion; that help in the way of seed and farm implements was sent to them, and that they are now doing well on their reserve and living in a state of contentment, which is all the greater from the wisdom gained through their experiences in the Riel rebellion.

